The highly influential teacher: recognising our unsung heroes

Lars Osterberg, Rachel Swigris, Amy Weil & William T Branch Jr

OBJECTIVES This study was designed to investigate the roles, characteristics and contributions to the educational process of highly influential teachers described retrospectively by faculty members who were former medical students and trainees.

METHODS The authors collected 20 appreciative inquiry narratives from a convenience sample of 22 faculty members (91% collection rate) at three medical schools that had volunteered to participate in a year-long programme of faculty development in humanism in medicine. The faculty members wrote narratives in response to the prompt: ‘Write about your most influential teacher.’ The four authors performed qualitative analysis of the 20 narratives using the constant comparison method to identify the characteristics of influential teachers.

RESULTS Particular relational features with their learners explain the profound influences of these teachers on the professional development of their learners. All influential teachers shared qualities of excellence in teaching and nearly all were described as caring, generous and selfless in their relationships with learners.

CONCLUSIONS Highly influential teachers have no official roles, yet appear to profoundly influence the professional development of many learners at various stages of the educational process.
INTRODUCTION

Medical educators have recently redoubled their efforts to train the ‘whole doctor’, a physician who encompasses all of the competencies as well as the core values of the physician within an authentic professional identity. Kegan theorises that a person’s identity formation progresses through several stages. Cruess et al. suggest that medical students and trainees navigate stages of identification with the profession by adopting and integrating its values of altruism and service and eventually becoming self-defining professionals. To understand the process of socialisation by which a medical trainee becomes a physician, educators must understand the positive teachers, guides and role models who influence the stages of identity formation. We describe here a previously largely unrecognised type of teacher who exerts major influences on medical students and trainees. We call this person ‘the highly influential teacher’. We identified the role and the importance of highly influential teachers by collecting narratives from participants at three of the 10 schools participating in a long-term faculty development programme designed to enhance humanistic practice and teaching. Our narrative methodology provides vivid, in-depth descriptions of relational meanings and impacts that deepen what has been learned about influential teachers in previous studies using surveys and brief interviews. When asked to write about their most influential teachers, the participants at our schools described individuals who had profoundly influenced their professional development far beyond what we had expected to find. After reading the narratives, we realised that highly influential teachers may be the unsung heroes of medical education. Here, we seek to define the role of the highly influential teacher by qualitative analysis of the faculty narratives. We ask: who are the highly influential teachers? How do they function? What special roles do they play in the education and professional development of their learners?

METHODS

Our qualitative study was approved by the institutional review boards at the respective institutions of the authors (WTB, LO, RS and AW) as part of a larger study examining the effects of a longitudinal (1-year) small group-based faculty development programme designed to enhance humanistic behaviours at 10 schools. The programme, described elsewhere, has been evaluated and found to be effective. Participants were selected at all schools, including the three that volunteered to take part in the present study, because they were recognised as promising and respected teachers who were willing to participate in a year-long faculty development programme. They generally functioned as clinical teachers on the faculties of their schools. Participants at the three schools involved in the present study were chosen as a convenience sample for this qualitative study. The four authors of this study comprise the principal investigator on the project and site leaders or facilitators from each of the three schools. Within the faculty development programme, participating faculty members at Stanford University (SU), University of Colorado, Denver (UCD) and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC) were asked to perform an appreciative inquiry narrative reflective exercise. Appreciative inquiry narratives describe an incident or circumstance in the subject’s life as a clinician, teacher or learner that stands out as particularly rewarding and meaningful. Participants were asked to write short narrative accounts describing their most influential teacher in response to the following prompt: ‘Write about your most influential teacher.’ We collected a total of 20 narratives from a possible 22 participating faculty members. Faculty staff at SU contributed eight narratives, faculty members at UCD contributed six narratives and faculty staff at UNC contributed six narratives. Participant rates were 89% (eight of nine) at SU, 100% (six of six) at UCD, and 86% (six of seven) at UNC (total collection rate: 91%).

We employed grounded theory by using the constant comparison method to analyse our narratives. The constant comparison method identifies persistent concepts, themes and illustrative phrases from a dataset, such as narratives. An initial analysis of some items in the dataset is compared with the analysis of new items, thereby generating new themes. When the investigators find that further
comparisons no longer generate new themes and insights, they may conclude that they have identified the most meaningful themes and plausible interpretations corresponding to the data.\textsuperscript{17–19} The four authors of this study met in conference calls on five occasions to iteratively compare themes and insights garnered from the reading of four to six narratives randomly selected from the dataset. Themes were recorded after each call and were revised with the objective of seeking new or deeper meanings after reading an additional four to six randomly selected narratives before the next call. Authors were not assigned narratives from their own schools, but all authors participated in the discussions. The authors identified quotations from the narratives that best illustrated each of the major themes. At the last of the five conference calls, all 20 of the narratives were reconsidered and searched for deeper meanings, themes and insights. At this time, we reached a point of saturation at which we discovered no additional insights.

RESULTS

Thirteen of the participating faculty staff named physicians who were clinical teachers as their most influential teachers. Eleven were clinical teachers in the participants’ programmes. Exceptions were a teacher observed from afar and known only by reputation, and one participant who named himself, having a humanistic moment influenced by the course. Seven participating faculty members named non-medical teachers, often middle school, high school, creative arts or college teachers, as having been most influential for them. These included a high school ballet teacher, a high school art teacher, two biology teachers and a college professor who had taught a class on Buddhism.

We grouped our qualitative analysis of the narratives into 13 main themes and included exemplifying verbatim examples taken from some narratives. These themes were divided into two domains: personal or teaching qualities of the teachers and relational qualities noted in the learner/teacher dyad.

Personal and teaching qualities

Being a caring person was an overarching theme mentioned in almost every description of a highly influential teacher. Nine additional main themes emerged within the domain of personal and teaching qualities (Table 1). All highly influential teachers shared qualities of excellence in teaching, mastery of their subject matter, and love or enthusiasm for teaching and practice. Certain personality traits and other characteristics were also ubiquitous among influential teachers. The influential teachers were described as generous and selfless. Addi-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Example quotation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mindful, present, calm</td>
<td>He never seemed rushed, always had time to hear from and respond to the questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passionate and dedicated to teaching</td>
<td>His enjoyment of subject matter was contagious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respected role model</td>
<td>…he stands as a role model for me, and I will certainly continue to emulate and pass on what I learned from him</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comfortable being vulnerable</td>
<td>…his own trials, tribulations, and regrets through his illustrious career, and key things I should learn from his own mistakes</td>
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<td>Prioritised teaching even when it was busy</td>
<td>…even when the night is busy, he always found time to teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>…is knowledgeable about the literature and able to quote any article …the teacher must be smart</td>
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<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>…full of smiles, charm, reward… his authenticity, his high energy and ability to really be in the moment created a much bigger impact… …students seemed to flock to him… he could inspire a rock to succeed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master communicator</td>
<td>…remarkably clear in his explanations …revered for his ability to convey information as opposed to trying to impress learners with how much more advanced his knowledge base is than theirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set high expectations</td>
<td>His expectations were high and he made you want to rise to meet them</td>
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tional personality traits included charisma, being non-judgemental, being comfortable in showing vulnerability, exhibiting calmness or equanimity, being a respected role model, and having high expectations of learners. Additional traits mentioned included being a master communicator and being mindfully present. The teachers were described as prioritising teaching even when busy. Five (25%) of the narrative writers overtly described the teacher’s setting of high expectations that matched the learner’s rather than the teacher’s goals.

**Relational qualities**

All influential teachers (excluding the two exceptions) were open to and formed meaningful relationships with their learners. Four main themes emerged in the domain of relational qualities (Table 2). They included: being generous and selfless in the relationship; caring about the longitudinal relationship; encouraging a relationship without hierarchy, and creating relationships in which learners could seek their own directions. Highly influential teachers characteristically allowed learners to define their own goals.

The influential teachers showed both personal and professional interest in their learners. One learner described a teacher using the phrase ‘She got me’. Another commented:

> She also took the time to get to know me as a person and inspired me to refine my personal goals and aspirations...

Yet another said:

> I was under the impression that he felt my opinion mattered.

Influential teachers met particular needs of the learners. The minority of influential teachers who were high school or college professors exemplify this point. They were often described as the person who had first recognised and encouraged a learner’s particular talent, or helped the learner overcome an inhibition or vulnerability. Passages through these developmental milestones were important contributors to learners’ future careers. One learner stated:

> She gave me space to be myself and to really sink my teeth into my passion, and she pushed me... to feed that hunger.

The initial attraction to the learner of the relationship with the teacher seemed to be linked to the teacher’s charisma, enthusiasm, high expectations for learning, encyclopaedic knowledge and other teaching qualities (Table 1). However, the learners in our sample seemed hungry for influential teachers who would be more than transient role models and were interested in helping them develop as physicians. Similarly, the influential teachers seemed to regularly make special efforts to reach out to students. Often surrounded by learners attracted to them by charisma and skilful teaching, they were also interested in the learners. Reading the narratives suggests a class of teachers who reach out, offer a helping hand, and collect learners around them, some of whom are seeking guidance in reaching their potential. The highly influential teachers were open to those learners who wished to form longer relationships. These learners took electives with them, sought their advice and attended their teaching sessions. The majority of relationships at this stage lasted for periods of months to a few years. The influential teachers became supportive guides and role models. Four of the relationships (20%) evolved into longer-lasting mentoring relationships. These often extended to family and social connections. For example, one narrative writer said:

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<td>Generous and giving, selfless in the relationship</td>
<td>She gave me an outstretched hand into her world, and beyond it</td>
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<td>Caring, longitudinal relationship focused on the learner’s personal development</td>
<td>Even more wonderful was the sense I got that this person truly cared not only about my learning, but about my longitudinal personal development and about inspiring me to go on and do great things in my career</td>
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<td>Removed hierarchy and valued learner as a colleague</td>
<td>He shared his wisdom with me in a way that made me feel less like a student and more like a colleague... gave me space to be myself and to really sink my teeth into my passion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraged learner to seek his or her own direction and achieve his or her own goals</td>
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I especially liked that we continue to stay in touch on a personal level.

Another said that his influential teacher:

...helped guide me through the non-clinical parts of my life, serving as a father figure for me.

Another summed up this very important person:

He is my mentor. He is my friend. He is the godfather of my children. He is family.

Sometimes identifying with the gender, ethnicity, or personal interests or struggles of the teacher was important for learners, such as in the case of a ballet teacher, who had revealed that she wanted to strengthen her students personally so that they would be resilient and not develop the same self-esteem issues that had led to an eating disorder in her own past.

In a few cases learners realised only in retrospect how important the relationship had been. Several learners noted that they had received harsh feedback from an influential faculty teacher, but had later appreciated the importance of the lessons learned. In one case this advice had been very specific and had referred to how the learner should stand her ground when working with colleagues; the learner in question was able to operationalise that advice and would later pass it on to her own learners.

Although the majority of influential teachers developed relationships with their learners lasting for a year or more, one teacher’s influence was based on a single event in which the faculty member made a lasting impression. The learner described being an intern with a patient to whom she was particularly bonded and reported how, on this patient’s death:

...this particular attending [physician], who I had not really had much interaction with, but who always seemed so “above the fray”, looked so affected by the death. I found some comfort knowing it was OK for me to be sad... he was really quite gentle when discussing our sweet patient and her death.

This brief but profoundly compassionate interaction with her influential teacher had a long-lasting impact on the learner, as her narrative written many years later demonstrates.

DISCUSSION

We identified a class of influential teachers who played major, often profoundly influential, roles in the personal and professional development of their learners. They tended not to be course directors, department chairs or residency programme directors, or to have other official roles. Rather, they were teachers in the programme, who seemed to make it their personal mission to be special guides, role models and mentors to their learners. Because almost all of our faculty participants identified an influential teacher who was important in their personal and career development, unsung individuals such as these teachers are probably not rare, although perhaps one has to search or be lucky to find an influential teacher best suited for oneself at the right moment. Often unrecognised, their input as a whole may contribute importantly to the educational missions of their academic institutions.

These teachers influenced their learners along various parts of the educational pathway, but most were clinical teachers. Most influential teachers drew students to them and exerted their powerfully positive influences through combinations of conventional teaching strengths. Some influential teachers attracted learners because of their mindfulness, humanism, exceptional communication skills, passion for their subject matter, and the high expectations they had of their learners. In addition, unique qualities associated with the teacher–learner relationship characterised the influential teachers. Influential teachers were generous, showed personal interest in the learner’s (rather than their own) chosen path of development, and showed caring toward the learner in both a professional and personal manner. In these ways, influential teachers often diminished the hierarchy that is pervasive in the medical field and formed meaningful relationships with their learners that lasted longer than the usual clinical rotation. Paukert and Richards studied medical students’ comments about teachers who had significantly and positively influenced their clinical education. Their analysis of 658 written comments identified being interested in teaching, being inspirational, being a role model, being caring and supportive of the learner, and providing opportunities for learning as characteristics of influential teachers. These qualities were present to a high degree in our smaller and more highly selected sample.
As we read the stories, we encountered the same attributes in these teachers that educators aspire to instil in their learners: a strong adherence to professional values, commitment to the creation of a culture of excellence, and the status of a lifelong learner. These traits are vital to professional identity formation. Thus, according to the models described by Kegan and Cruess et al., our faculty staff writers had mostly sought role models who themselves exemplified high-level professional formation and socialisation. We postulate that the strong influence and examples set by the influential teachers contributed importantly to the formation of a professional identity in their learners.

At times, influential teachers made special contributions to their learners. We call these contributions ‘gifts of learning’. We conceive of gifts of learning that occur at a crucial stage of a learner’s development. Gifts of learning were overtly described in four narratives and implied in many others. A gift of learning is both personally and generally important, and sometimes involves exposing the teacher’s vulnerability by sharing or by making a personal disclosure that imparts wisdom. For example, one narrative writer had this to say about his teacher:

> For a teacher, it is self-awareness and humility to understand the gift that is passing on their information.

Who were the highly influential teachers? Several qualities appeared characteristic. They seemed to be internally motivated. They lived the values they espoused. Perhaps this is why they chose to become an influential teacher rather than following some other career path. They seemed motivated by generosity and internal rewards, and not by external recognition or promotion. In this way, they were like the highly selected group of physician-educators studied by Simpson et al. Their career decisions seemed to have ‘emanated from an underlying set of values associated with making the world better’.

We have described the influential teachers as being unsung. They were never identified by official titles in our collected narratives. As far as we could tell, they had no assigned role other than that of teacher. They may have won teaching awards, but these were not mentioned in the narratives. Perhaps largely invisible to the educational establishment, we believe that highly influential teachers like these contribute importantly to the educational mission. For example, one learner noted:

> He never gave up working with me and helping me to be the best that I could be.

Limitations

Our study has the limits of a qualitative analysis. Qualitative analyses typically study small datasets. They seek to discover insights, new concepts and meaning. Our qualitative analysis can identify attributes that appear characteristic, but cannot measure the numbers or proportions of influential teachers residing in a programme. Likewise, our analysis cannot quantify the impacts of influential teachers on all learners or even on our participants. We give numbers in our study to illustrate the characteristics of influential teachers that seemed obvious to us, but our numbers are illustrative. In addition, our observations may not be generalisable to learners who did not choose to enrol in a faculty development programme in humanism. It is relevant to this point, however, that many narratives described these same teachers influencing other learners in addition to the writers of our narratives. Likewise, the results may not generalise to faculty members at smaller institutions, such as community hospitals or more rural training sites.

CONCLUSIONS

We have described the qualities and the teacher–learner relationships that characterise a highly influential teacher. It may be possible to promote the qualities of influential teachers through faculty development. Creating an educational culture that reflects the values by which these teachers live appears to be equally important. As powerful role models, influential teachers may encourage others to choose similar career pathways. Education leaders should work to identify and nourish the influential teachers residing in their programmes as a means of passing the torch of influential teaching to younger generations.

Contributors: all authors made substantial contributions to the study conception and design, the analysis and interpretation of data, and the drafting of the article. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the paper and approved the final manuscript for submission. All authors have agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work and for ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Acknowledgements: the authors thank the Josiah Macy Jr Foundation for its generous support of our work on faculty development for humanistic role models and teachers.
Funding: this study was supported by the Josiah Macy Jr Foundation.

Conflicts of interest: none.

Ethical approval: this study was approved by the institutional review boards of Emory University, Stanford University, the University of Colorado, Denver and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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Received 2 March 2015; editorial comments to author 12 March 2015, 27 May 2015; accepted for publication 8 June 2015